



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

Old State House 150 Benefit Street Providence, RI 02903

Telephone 401-222-2678
TTY 401-222-3700

Fax 401-222-2968
www.preservation.ri.gov

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Contact: Sarah Zurier, RIHPHC, 401-222-4142, szurier@preservation.ri.gov

**PRUDENCE ISLAND HERITAGE:
FARNHAM FARM LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER**

A small agricultural complex on Prudence Island has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of agriculture. Frederick C. Williamson, Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission (RIHPHC), announced that the National Park Service has added Farnham Farm to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Farnham Farm encompasses several of the historic elements of an island farmstead, including house, barn, milk house, fields, garden, woodland, orchard, and stone walls. It is significant as the last remaining working historic farmstead on Prudence Island.

The Farnham Farm property is located off Mount Pleasant Avenue; it includes about 18 acres of cleared land, a small group of buildings arranged around a central yard, fields used as pasture, a fenced garden, a woodlot, an orchard, a landscaped path, and stone walls.

While the history of Farnham Farm extends back over two centuries, the history of Prudence Island goes back at least to 1637, when Roger Williams and John Winthrop, of Boston, purchased the island from the Narragansetts. In 1647, Prudence and nearby Patience Island became

part of the town of Portsmouth. For the next hundred years, absentee landlords rented the much of the land to tenant farmers. Eventually, farms passed from Massachusetts merchants to island and Newport owners. Both tenant and land-owning farmers prospered thanks to trade relationships with Newport and other communities on Narragansett Bay.

During the Revolution, however, Prudence Island agriculture was almost completely destroyed. All residents and livestock were evacuated; nearly every house and barn was burned. Neither Newport nor Prudence fully recovered from the effects of the war. The population was decimated, their urban center was diminished, and their trading opportunities dried up. Through the nineteenth century, Prudence remained a backwater. Economic activity slowed, and the island became far more isolated than it had been in the previous century.

The Dennis family established a farm on the property during this period of stagnation. Little is known about the farm's early decades, but it is likely that the owners combined subsistence and commercial farming, raising livestock, grains, and corn. The Dennis family constructed a small, one-and-one-half-story house (still at the center of the existing house) around 1805 and a barn (now the center section of the present barn) in the 1850s.

Elizabeth Dennis sold the farm to Edward Farnham around 1867, and the Farnhams made a series of improvements to the property over the next 87 years. In the 1880s, they erected new additions to the barn in order to expand dairying operations. They also updated the house with a two-story, hip-roof addition around 1872 and a two-story, gable-roof addition in 1890. The Farnhams constructed the latter addition at a time when Prudence was developing as a summer destination, and the additional rooms may have been intended for summer visitors. Farm families rented out guest rooms, and other landowners sold tracts to developers for house lots. Local attractions were few, but included a recreational hall, a new stone wharf, and a seasonal ferry running between Bristol and the east shore of the island.

The Farnham family worked the farm from their arrival on the island in the 1860s until the 1950s, except for a period of time from about 1907 to 1928, when the farm was leased to tenants. They kept a herd of dairy cows and sold milk locally through home delivery and at island stores. The small, parged rubblestone milk house at Farnham Farm likely dates from the turn of the century. The Farnhams also raised crops for sale: potatoes, melons, beets, carrots, lettuce, raspberries, strawberries, and corn. Hay and corn fed the cows, pigs, and horses, and the family also grew small amounts of wheat and rye.

In 1954, when pasteurization of milk was required for all dairies, commercial farming came to an end at the Farnham Farm. Most of Prudence's farms had ceased operation by this time, and local fields returned to scrub and forest or were removed by the U.S. Navy (when the southern end of the island became an ammunition depot). In 1998, the Prudence Conservancy agreed to purchase the Farnham Farm in order to preserve and restore it for the community.

The National Register nomination for Farnham Farm was prepared by Judith Ann Foster of the Prudence Conservatory. According to Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the RIHPHC, "Farnham Farm reflects the low-key lifestyle of farmers and visitors to Prudence Island a century ago."

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed on the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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